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The Wooden Architecture *of the* LOWER DELAWARE VALLEY

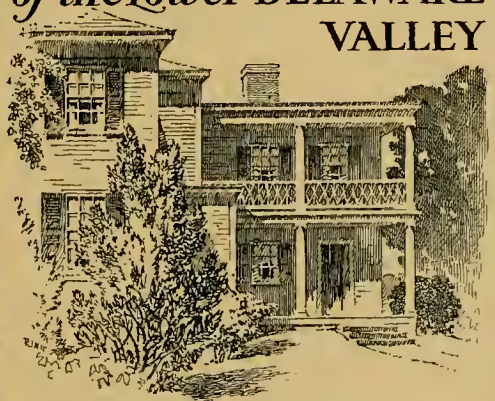
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Jewett A Grosvenor

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An Architectural MONOGRAPH on The Wooden Architecture of the Lower DELAWARE VALLEY



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HOUSE AT GREENWICH, NEW JERSEY. Detail of Façade.

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THE WOODEN ARCHITECTURE OF THE LOWER DELAWARE VALLEY

By JEWETT A. GROSVENOR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENNETH CLARK AND PH. B. WALLACE

THE Massachusetts colonist disregarded the abundant supply of stone about him and built a timber house. The early Pennsylvania colonist, hailing from a different part of England, settled in a land heavily wooded with a plentiful supply of the best timber heart could wish and used it merely to construct a log cabin for temporary shelter until he had time to quarry stone or bake bricks and build a dwelling of a type like that to which he had been accustomed in the Mother Country. If one may be permitted the indulgence of making a very bromidic observation, we are all creatures of habit. In no one particular is our addiction to hereditary custom more likely to come to the surface than in matters of architecture. This tendency on the part of the first settlers to stick to their own several architectural traditions has been pointed out more than once.

Although the persistent ignoring of physical conditions and clinging to traditional preference for materials and methods of construction, which the colonists, their fathers, and their grandfathers before them had been used to in England, gave the domestic architecture of our earliest Colonial period both variety and a pronounced individual bias, according to the town or shire the settlers had come from, common sense and necessity in time brought modifications, while independence of action and originality grew apace. Independent action, however, in the face of customary usage was always somewhat of an exception; and as exceptions are generally of special interest, for their comparative rarity if for no other reason, so we find it in the case of the wooden houses of Eastern Pennsylvania, West Jersey and Delaware, a portion of the land where the majority of the English settlers showed their traditional preference for stone or brick.

The Swedes in Delaware apparently had no predisposition against timber and used it. Among the colonists of British origin, the men of West Jersey, notwithstanding the excellent early brickwork there to be seen, were the first to adapt themselves to conditions with good grace, make a virtue of necessity, and build of timber when it was well-nigh impossible to get stone and nearly as difficult to come by suitable brick. Their soil was stoneless, good brick clay was scarce, the pine growth was abundant, and they did the obvious thing—they built of timber. And posterity has never had cause to regret their choice. In Pennsylvania wooden structures of any amenity came later—the end of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth—and reflected the characteristics of the time. In each of these three States, the domestic wooden architecture has peculiarities of its own, but all of it yields interest and from all of it something suitable for modern adaptation can be gained.

In Delaware, at a very early date, dwellings of the type of the oldest house in Dover—chosen as an illustration, not for appearances, but for its archæological value—were not uncommon and were also to be seen in the Swedish portions of Philadelphia. They were of mixed English and Swedish parentage. The outstanding chimney is English, the gambrel roof with its sharp lower pitch sounds a Scandinavian note in contour. The type is simple but strong, and susceptible of interesting development. The old batten shutters, with boards set chevron-wise to form a her-

ring-bone figure, still left on one of the lower windows, are to be noted as characteristic of this part of the country. Despite the neglect and ill usage to which this house has plainly been subjected, its clapboard walls and shingle roof are still staunch and weather-worthy.



OLDEST HOUSE AT DOVER, DELAWARE.

Across the Delaware River, in South and West Jersey, where the easy and substantial affluence of a fertile farming region of large plantations encouraged building, one finds a different condition obtaining. From Salem up to Burlington or Bordentown, in the face of stone and brick tradition and the precedent of numerous fine examples of early brickwork, especially in the neighborhood of Salem, many of the prosperous farmers soon took to the course of least resistance and built of wood.

One of the first, and one of the most interesting, examples of West Jersey wooden architecture is "The Willows," on a point of land jutting into Newton Creek near Gloucester, a structure dating from about 1720. It was once a handsome country seat, but, years ago, owing to the encroachment of manufacturing plants, became untenable as a residence and was abandoned to tenancy and truck-farming. Nevertheless, despite its external dilapidation and sorry surroundings, the house presents features that the student of architecture cannot afford to neglect. Indeed, just because of its dilapidation, some of its structural peculiarities have become visible and admit of easy analysis in a way that would be impossible in a structure kept in decent repair. Besides being one of the earliest wooden houses, it shows the combination of a later addi-



"THE WILLOWS," GLOUCESTER, NEW JERSEY.
Built circa 1720.



HOUSE AT GREENWICH, NEW JERSEY.

tion, with its opportunity for making comparisons, not to be found in any other of the contemporary buildings in the neighborhood. The older or eastern portion (to the right in the picture) is built of three-inch white pine planks, double grooved with sliding tongues and even joints dovetailed together at the corners. The structure is really a piece of cabinet work rather than a piece of carpentry, and is a monument to the skill of the joiner—the old term is peculiarly appropriate for the artisan in this instance—who framed it together. It is only since the loosening and dropping off of the corner boards that this feature of construction has become visible.

"The Willows," as are also nearly all other old West Jersey wooden houses, is "brick-paned," or lined with a solid brick wall inside the plank or clapboard exterior and between the studs. So substantial is the structure and so thorough the workmanship, that, after nearly two centuries, only slight repairs and reasonable care are needed to make it as fit as it ever was.

Of an entirely different type are the capacious, foursquare, clapboarded houses, of slightly later date, that are to be found a-plenty throughout West Jersey. Of this class the house at Bordentown may be regarded as representative, or the house at Salem. These houses boasted a symmetrical, rectangular plan with central hallway from front to back,—rooms on each side of it, an ell extension at the rear, and chimneys at each gabled end. There is rarely any attempt at embellishment, for most of these houses were built by plain Friends who had conscientious objections both to collars on their coats and ornament on their dwellings. The simplest kind of cornice is ordinarily the only concession to the impulse for decoration. Otherwise, nine out of every ten are as plain as the proverbial pipestem, but their proportions are usually agreeable and their general aspect seems to fit in with the quiet affluence and unassuming thrift that furnishes forth their old mahogany midday dinner table with blue Canton and old silver and yet



HOUSE AT BORDENTOWN, NEW JERSEY.
Built circa 1740.



HOUSE AT BORDENTOWN, NEW JERSEY. Doorway Detail.



THE EWING HOUSE, MOORESTOWN, NEW JERSEY. Built circa 1800.



THE BILDERBECK HOUSE, SALEM, NEW JERSEY. Built in 1813.

sets master in shirt sleeves and men in overalls side by side to devour the plenteous fare.

Of more urbane and polished type by far, is the Haddonfield house that appears in the illustration. Chronologically characteristic of the early nineteenth century, it also combines in its aspect an unmistakable note of Quaker reticence and austerity. The usual Classic Revival type is perfectly familiar, but here is a Classic Revival type pared down, attenuated, robbed of all self-assertion, and compressed into Quaker simplicity. The residuum from the transformation a new building of exceedingly restrained and austere design: "That ain't no architecture; that's a packing box."

Of great charm is the house on the Haddonfield Pike, set amid its box bushes and ancient yew trees, with its modest porches and its side wing expanded into a broad gambrel-roofed structure, only a little less in size than the main body of the dwelling. The house is thoroughly representative of the town, which is itself representative of the best traditions of West Jersey wooden architecture, peculiarly reminiscent of Elizabeth



HOUSE AT HADDONFIELD, NEW JERSEY.
Built circa 1810.

turns out to be singularly agreeable. The house, with a door at one side of the front, two windows beside it, three windows on the front of the second floor, and a wing or extension at the side or the rear, belongs to a well recognized type that flourished at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But this type commonly exhibited an accompaniment of some emphatic Classic details. Here, on the contrary, we have the Classic items reduced to the lowest terms, like a rigid Quaker's speech and fashion of garb, and with some elegance withal. Had any more been subtracted, there would have been a risk of meriting the shrewd old countryman's criticism, upon seeing Haddon, that firm and virile-minded seventeenth-century maiden who assumed her father's interests, founded the town, courted and married—of her own initiative, tradition says—and continued to sign and be known by her maiden name.

Another house typical of West Jersey domestic architecture in wood, the previously mentioned eighteenth-century building at Bordentown, might be called the decorated member of the symmetrically arranged rectangular dwelling class. The detail of the Bordentown building (1740) is rather unique in point of the course of small panels below a frieze ornamented with



HOUSE NEAR PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA.

drapery swags, the fine mouldings of the window casings, and the slender, semi-engaged pillars of the door frame that suggest the work of an artisan from the Dutch counties of North Jersey.

A reversion to the old type of smooth-jointed, grooved-plank construction may be seen in the Moorestown house, dating from about 1800. Both in plan and architectural amenity the illustrations show this building is a highly creditable exemplar of what may be achieved in a wooden medium.

These several types of West and South Jersey wooden houses have set a precedent that has been assiduously followed by later generations in New Jersey towns, so far as material alone is concerned. How much better they might have followed or adapted it in the matter of architectural expression, the "man who was blind in one eye and couldn't see with the other" might tell at a glance. One needs only go through the coast towns or the inland Jersey towns but a little way from New York to be overpowered with the dreary horrors perpetrated anywhere between 1860 and 1885, or even later. Between those years the jig-saw decorator was rampaging at large and embellishing (?) the wooden packing boxes that prostituted a noble building material and did more to give wood, for the time being, a bad name as an architectural medium than any other one thing in the history of building. The old houses show what charm frame dwellings were capable of presenting in intelligent hands.



HOUSE AT WOODSTOWN, NEW JERSEY.

The wooden architecture of the Lower Delaware Valley, while not so abundant as in some other parts of the country, for reasons already mentioned, is nevertheless invested with the merit of a distinct individuality, or several individualities, and has its share to contribute both to the story of house building in America and to modern inspiration.



17 Market Street.



The Bilderbeck House.

DOORWAYS AT SALEM, NEW JERSEY.



HOUSE AT 17 MARKET STREET, SALEM, NEW JERSEY.



MARKET CONDITIONS AFFECTING WHITE PINE

THESE are times of rapid price changes and hysterical predictions, so much so that many men have begun to doubt whether the so-called laws of economics have any force or whether any natural law exists.

With something over forty-two thousand sawmills in the United States—with almost as many owners—all working independently, it is perhaps not surprising, with the present unprecedented and abnormal lumber demand, that there should be so little stability in lumber prices. Corrective forces are at work, however, which must and will accomplish results, even though of necessity the motion is slow.

Industry these days is so necessarily involved with the many complex social and economic effects growing out of the World War, that any attempt at explanation of market conditions must be predicated upon an understanding of the extent of those effects and the limitations they have thrown around our present industrial activity.

The immediate need seems to be production, —the big immediate problem, how to bring it about and how to distribute it.

Perhaps there is not a single social or economic question that does not in some degree either directly or indirectly affect the lumber industry. It seems to be subject to all of the perplexing industrial problems of the day. Yet in attempting a brief explanation of its present condition and a few of the reasons therefor, we may find some assurance that progress is being made, and that the lumber industry will do its part in helping to solve the urgent housing and building problems both of this country and of Europe.

Lumber production during the war was seriously curtailed. Labor shortage, car and transportation difficulties, together with building restrictions, all were contributing causes. Production of lumber was reduced to perhaps fifty per cent. of the pre-war period, and against this the tremendous demands for lumber during that period by industrial plants and for war purposes, rapidly reduced the available stocks.

The early part of 1919 found us, then, with lumber stocks low and with production also at a low ebb. Lumber prices up to that time had risen slightly, but had not kept pace with the advance in other commodities.

Then, suddenly, an unprecedented lumber de-

mand seemed to sweep down from all quarters, and while the industry is large and production facilities are enormous, they were unable to meet, in any sense, this demand. And, again, under pressure of increasing manufacturing costs, car shortage, and transportation difficulties, coupled with this urgent demand, prices rose rapidly,—perhaps, with the multitudinous and widely separated ownerships, quite naturally bringing about a strongly noticeable divergence in the prices asked in different districts and even by different sellers in the same locality.

It is this condition to which the lumber industry is now trying to adjust itself. Production is gaining headway. Speculative buying, while to be expected as long as demand exceeds supply and production, is less prevalent. The next few months will, we hope, see the establishment of a basis somewhere near a standard basis for lumber values in the new order of things. Lumber is just now seeking its place and rapidly finding it. There will be a settling process soon, and the speed with which we are to arrive at it will depend only on how quickly we can get production up to capacity, or, more properly, the extent to which labor unrest, transportation difficulties, and. general social and economic developments permit of that attainment.

The lumber industry, once wholly in action, is big enough and strong enough to keep pace with the building needs of the country. There is no danger of shortage of stock items of lumber as long as our social and economic structure holds out against the forces that at times threaten to undermine it.

There will be delays and some disappointments, but there will be progress, and the lumber industry will do its share.

White Pine is holding its place in the scheme of things. The latest available Government statistics show an annual cutting of White Pine at about two and one half billion feet, being exceeded only by Douglas Fir, with an annual output of about six billion feet, and Southern Yellow Pine, with a yearly production of thirteen billion feet. Production of White Pine is decreasing in the Eastern and Lake States, but is increasing in Idaho and adjoining States, where there is still a vast acreage of old-growth virgin White Pine.

The tremendous demands for White Pine are being met and will continue to be met as fast as the numerous influences outside the control of its manufacturers will permit. The years to come will still find it the same big factor in available lumber supply, the same standard of lumber value that it is to-day and always has been.



THE PRICE HOUSE, GERMANTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA.

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Any information desired regarding White Pine will be furnished by any member of either Association or by the

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